

***University ESL Students' Challenges and Insights Towards Online Learning  
Amidst COVID Pandemic***

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**Abstract**

The sudden change of English language learning and teaching from face-to-face classroom interaction to blended learning activities using digital platforms has initiated numerous challenges for English as Second Language (ESL) students in the various universities in the Philippines including Mindanao State University- Marawi City; hence, examining these learners' challenges and their insights of the online learning activities is extremely necessary. This study, therefore, aimed to identify and analyze the ESL students' challenges and insights in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing the data collected using self-written reflections and semi-structured interviews from two hundred thirty-seven (237) University ESL learners, the results revealed that the primary challenges faced by the learners include poor/weak/slow/unstable/unreliable internet connection, lack of time management, financial problems, mental health issues and lack of motivation and engagement. Such results further depicted several valuable insights from the students to cope with those challenges such as a change of perspectives and habits like having a positive outlook on the situation by accepting and embracing the new normal way of learning, managing their time properly, and strengthening social support. Finally, the outcomes of this study contribute to providing understanding as well as awareness for English teachers, ESL students, and school administrators to enhance and advance the efficiency of online teaching and learning activities, especially in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** ESL Learners' Challenges, Learners' Insights, Online Learning, COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted nations worldwide; it has inconveniently caused not only loss of lives and disruptions to the economy but also abrupt and overwhelming changes in the educational systems, with the longest school closures combined with an intimidating recession. Students, schools, colleges, and universities have been severely affected. These disruptions to educational systems over the past years have driven substantial losses and inequalities in learning to students in particular- both curricular/co-curricular, and extra-curricular. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the pandemic affected more than 1.5 billion students and youth with the most vulnerable learners being hit the hardest. Similarly, World Bank (2021) also expressed that the disruption of education caused by the pandemic was considered 'learning poverty'. World Bank also reported that with the spread of COVID-19, among many interruptions to normal life, more than 160 countries have mandated temporary school closures, leaving 1.6 billion children and youth out of school.

The employment of online teaching and learning has become one option, if not the only option, explored by academic institutions around the world, including the Philippines to ascertain the continuity of education. Interestingly, that was deemed to be the 'best solution' in the new normal setup despite some noted impediments. In this approach, instruction and learning take place in a remote and technology-dependent environment using different technological tools and materials including synchronous and asynchronous communication tools such as Google Classrooms, Zoom, and Moodle. The availability of such tools as well as their convenience for both the teachers and students became the basis for their selection.

However, while other educational institutions in the Philippines resorted to solely online teaching and learning or exclusively modular distance learning, Mindanao State University-Main Campus, an institution of higher learning in the city of Marawi, Philippines, adopted the blended learning approach in conducting all academic activities in response to the call of the government thru Republic Act No. 11469 otherwise known as the "Bayanihan to Heal As One Act", wherein the government in an effort to prevent the spread of Covid-19 directed everyone in the country, among others, to adhere strict observance of the preventive measures and health protocols which includes but not limited to physical distancing, avoiding large gatherings, and wearing of face mask. Moreover, to comply with the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) guidelines in ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of students, administrative personnel, and other constituents of the university, the faculty were directed to observe the following guidelines in conducting classes: (1) the distance/remote learning, which could be delivered either as a synchronous or asynchronous or combination of both, shall be adopted as the main approach in conducting classes; (2) Limited face-to-face (F2F) mode of conducting classes may be employed by the faculty when circumstances warrant in accordance with the IATF guidelines and CHED advisories; (3) Administration of examinations and assessments may be conducted either online or F2F at the option of the faculty. The F2F examination and assessment, however, may be deferred by the faculty until circumstances warrant in accordance with IATF regulations; and (4) Laboratory classes, which require F2F/hands-on involvement, shall be offered in the Second Semester (AY 2020-2021) assuming that the existing IATF restriction on F2F classes is already lifted. However, laboratory classes that can be done virtually may be offered in the First Semester (AY 2020-2021). Indeed, these changes have brought massive challenges to the students.

It must be noted that online learning is not something that has just recently come about. In fact, studies show that teaching and learning through digital platform has gained popularity among higher education institutions throughout the years because of the following: (1) it offers ease and comfort; (2) it allows flexibility of access; (3) it presents a non-discriminating environment, (4) it enables 'limitless' education; (5) it allows learners to be updated with latest trends; and (6) it is relatively affordable.

Further, many studies claim that online learning provides exceptional benefits in the learning process including English language learning. For instance, Kuama and Intharaksa (2016) cited several studies that support such idea, namely: Clarke and Hermes (2001) posited that online learning is student-centered because students can control their own learning pace, and activities can be flexible to better suit a student's preferred learning style; in the same vein, Dolence & Norris (1995) also postulated that online learning creates opportunities for active learning; and still, Harasim, Calvert & Groeneboer's study (1997) stated that with good online learning applications or software, students have opportunities to participate in the discussion, express opinions, and share knowledge equally regardless of classroom size and time.

Moreover, Lao, et.al (2005) indicated that knowledge of the online process, understanding the potential of using a web-based course instructional platform for teaching, and being aware of the responsibilities involved in teaching online courses can help facilitate a meaningful and positive experience for learners. Nonetheless, other studies also revealed that the popularity of online learning and teaching and its extensive practice remains to be isolated in some countries, especially in developed ones; however, the case does not hold true in the Philippines in which it can be noticed that the Philippine Educational System favors so much the traditional approach of education. Online learning, therefore, is in its infancy in the country, and its introduction to instructors and students did not gradually happen; instead, it was done in haste due to the pandemic; hence this posts a certain concern. Thus, investigating the challenges and insights of ESL learners in online learning was indeed an important task.

This study, therefore, aimed to identify the challenges encountered by ESL learners in online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It also sought to determine which of those challenges was the most difficult. Finally, it explored the insights of ESL learners towards online learning. Various studies have already been conducted regarding the challenges encountered by teachers in online classes during the pandemic, yet few were done about those faced by learners, specifically, English language learners; hence, this present study. This was significant as it would provide awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by ESL learners in online learning as well as their insights which can be considered by language teachers in offering solutions to such challenges. Besides, this could also prove to be insightful for ESL teachers who are still developing the online mode of learning.

## **Methodology**

In identifying and analyzing the ESL learners' challenges and insights, the descriptive research design was employed because this kind of research design allows the researcher to describe a profound understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Self-written reflections as well as semi-structured interviews were employed in collecting the data in which learners were requested to write their short reflections about the learning challenges they faced during online learning. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were done with selected students to come up with an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

## **Participants**

The participants of this study were two hundred thirty-seven ESL learners (176 females and 60 males) who were taking varied courses from the different colleges of the Mindanao State University- Marawi Campus, Philippines. They were all enrolled in the Purposive Communication course during the duration of the study. Their ages range from 15-25 years old.

## **Instruments, Data Collection and Data Analysis**

This study employed two instruments, the self-written reflections as well as the semi-structured interviews to get the data needed. The first instrument- the self-written reflection, which is a written account template composed of three (3) questions was given to the participants thru Google forms in order to express and disclose freely their experiences about online learning challenges and insights during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were required to write their responses to the questions given. The collection of data using this instrument was administered from August 2020-January 2022 when classes were done through online teaching. The second instrument—the semi-structured interviews, which were employed following the results of self-written reflection, were conducted with selected participants who were invited to validate their challenging experiences written in their reflections. Such interviews were conducted via google meet and call phone. The interviews were then recorded using an audio recording and transcribed for the sake of data analysis.

In analyzing the data, several stages were done. First, the data obtained both from self-written reflections and semi-structured interviews were tabulated, then classified based on several themes based on the research questions, which are the ESL learners' challenges and insights. Such themes were reviewed and analyzed which led to the results of the data analysis.

## **Findings and discussion**

The analysis disclosed that the participants of this present study encountered difficulties when attending online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, attending online classes is itself a great challenge for them as they have not been used to it. Based on the findings, the learners' challenges lie in their struggle to adapt to online courses, their problems with internet connectivity, their lack of direct contact with their professors, their difficulties with their finances, their lack of motivation to attend classes, their issues with mental health, and their time management; hence prevalent themes include poor/weak/slow/unstable/unreliable internet connection, lack of time management, financial problems, mental health issues and lack of motivation and engagement. Such findings concur with the findings of other studies regarding the challenges faced by students in online classes; thus, the list of challenges should be considered by course coordinators and program chairs by offering solutions to these challenges.

It is interesting to note that the responses of the participants of this study to the questions being asked seemed to be similar and interconnected, which gave the researcher the opportunity to classify them smoothly and conveniently. Several significant responses during the semi-structured interviews as well as the self-written reflections revealed the following:

“Online learning is totally new to me. I have not prepared myself.”

“Language learning has become different in online learning. Many students may like it but not me. I am always stressed; I lose my motivation; I am having mental problems not to mention financial problems.”

“I live in a far-flung place where internet connectivity is very poor and unstable. This made me very sad and disappointed as I can hardly join in our Google Meet with my Purposive Communication Class.”

“I encounter innumerable challenges in online learning, and I cannot focus on my studies because of them. The unstable internet connection in particular really affects my performance in class.”

“I've been struggling a lot when we're having google meet and when doing my homeworks because the internet connection was not stable. I've been doing household chores also- taking care of my little sisters and nephews, cooking for them food for every meal, attending a seminar for our barangay (I am the SK Treasurer of Brgy Cabasaran), and so on. It has been so hard for me, really but I had to endure it for my parents. I want them to be proud. I also had to go to Cagayan de Oro when Exams are coming just to have a better internet connection. I booked a flight to Manila using my savings and stayed there for a month just to focus on studying. I have no time to hang out with my friends or watch new kdramas. I've been stressing my mind and that gave me anxiety. I've put too much time into my study and forgot that I had to take good care of my health too.”

“I have been experiencing mental breakdowns since online learning started because I'm having trouble grasping and understanding all our lessons.”

“There are so many activities that our instructors are giving us, and I cannot manage my time doing all those.”

“I found the poor internet connectivity as the most difficult challenge for I cannot control it. It is something I blame for not learning more effectively in an online class. I do hope the government will do something in addressing our needs, especially since we are on a pandemic.”

“The challenges I've encountered during online classes were adaptability, technical issues, self-motivation, and self-discipline. It was challenging for me to adapt to this new normal, flexible learning since I've spent my entire student life learning in the traditional way. I've also encountered some technical issues since I live in Marawi City where the internet connection is often an issue and there's always a power interruption. Motivating and disciplining myself has also been one of the challenges I've encountered. Unlike in the face-to-face classes, I somehow lost my motivation to learn.”

“Everything about online classes is new to me and I tried my best to get used to it, however the frustrating internet connection hinders me to participate well in my classes. The unavailability of stuff like gadgets, flash drive because of downloading numerous files and videos sucks sometimes as it caused poor phone storage.”

“Online class has never been easy for me, and it still surprises me until now. I have encountered new things in my school life that I've never had during face-to-face classes. First, self-doubts. I've doubted myself and my capacity. Second, mental breakdown. Last, I lost myself and my dreams.”

“The challenges that I have encountered in the past semester in relation with online class is having a poor internet connection and being left behind. Since we're doing online classes, I find it very hard to communicate with other people, like finding a group chat for my subject and asking my instructor for clarification. Even though I find it hard to communicate with my classmate, I still try my best not to get left behind. I always check my phone for updates so that I would get informed about the new task given by the teacher.”

“Since my parents provided most of the things I need, I only had problems on things that they cannot control. It was troubling when the internet connection suddenly got weak while I was doing my online school tasks. I also had problems with the environment, our neighbors were doing activities sometimes that produced loud sounds which distracted me.”

“It was hard for me to cope during this pandemic because my mental health was getting worse every day. It was hard for me to do the Return Demonstration videos which led me to drop the subject. I noticed that I can't finish my classwork when it's piled up and it's hard for me to balance it all.”

“I have been struggling these past few months because of many factors that really affect me as a student of this new online session. These include anxiety, depression, poor Internet service, and unfavorable home learning environment, which were aggravated when we are marginalized and from remote areas.”

“I had been struggling attending online classes. I partly blame it on the internet connection that we have at home. The online class is a struggle for me who is not a virtual person. I prefer interacting with my classmates and teachers Face-to-face than by entering a gmeet that makes me shy as a student. Another thing is that whenever I am submitting my work, especially the videos, it takes too long to submit. Examination is also hard for me as the gform keeps on updating when the internet connection gets lost making me consume more time in answering my test. Overall, my life as an online class student has been so hard for me. I am still trying to adjust and hopefully my life in 2nd semester gets better than the previous one.”

Moreover, findings showed that among the challenges encountered by the participants during online classes, the most difficult ones included poor internet connectivity, mental health issues, and lack of motivation. However, most, if not all of the participants discerned internet connectivity issues as the most difficult for they have no control over it. Truly, such was a perennial problem that must be addressed by the authorities as it greatly affected the ESL learners' experiences in the new normal. Some of the interesting yet crucial responses from the participants were shown below:

“Based on experience, online class is indeed challenging, and having a data connection problem is the most difficult for me because once there's a problem in data connection, I missed all discussions given.”

“The poor internet speed in our place is the biggest hindrance in my online classes journey. Even how interested and motivated I am to participate in class discussions, but I always lost my interest because of the weak and unstable internet signal.”

“I know that countless challenges came our way which are all difficult to deal with, but for me, the most difficult challenge that I have encountered is when having a slow or unstable internet connection because the internet is the most essential thing which has a vital role nowadays. For instance, I can't do research or submit my class works on time especially if it has a large number of size files or even can't take or finish a particular exam because of having slow internet connectivity. This could be the reason why students like me can't cope with our class or cannot join live meetings or synchronous classes.”

“The most difficult challenge for me that I've encountered in the previous semester is anxiety, the feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. I have this fear of having failing grades at the midpoint of the semester. The activities got very difficult and the pressure from my father was so much that it made me feel like I was just breathing, not living anymore.”

“I can say that having a too slow internet connection is the most difficult challenge in online classes. I can't participate in the synchronous class, sometimes I can't even understand anything in the discussion. When I lost internet connection, I see myself being left behind because I don't know a thing about the activities given and that caused anxiety to me.”

“Online classes worsen my anxiety. I became really anxious when I heard a notification from my phone. Everything is affected.”

“Among the various challenges I encountered, I consider self-motivation and discipline as the most difficult challenge so far. Since I have struggled so much to adapt to this new normal, I have lost almost all of my motivation and that has caused me to have such a hard time disciplining myself. Along with that, there are also other struggles I've dealt with at home, with family and friends, and with myself, which affected my academic performance.”

“The internet connection in our area was really bad and instead of having enough time to sleep I have to set my alarm clock at 2:30 A.M. to submit, upload files and download learning materials in our google classroom. It's very challenging when taking exams and whenever there's an oral recitation in google meet because the signal is kind of troublesome. That's the hardest part of it.”

“Staying up all night to wait for the time when internet signal will be okay is the most difficult challenge for me; I always lack enough sleep and I fear I might get sick because of that. I wish we go back to face-to-face classes.”

“Staying in our hometown that has a poor internet connection is my most challenging experience. I had to traverse 2-3 puroks in our barangay and sometimes to other municipalities just to get a stable internet connection in order to participate in class. It's time-consuming, expensive, and risky, especially for my health. I had to endure everything just to do online learning.”

“The challenges I consider the most difficult is the time management because it's really hard for me to manage my time; there are a lot of tasks to do online, yet only short time to do them plus the slow internet connectivity in our place, it's hard to control my time.”

The results further depicted several valuable insights from the students to cope with those challenges such as a change of perspectives and habits like having a positive outlook on the situation by accepting and embracing the new normal way of learning, managing their time properly, and strengthening social support throughout creating groups on Facebook and other social networking sites, which enhance collaboration and teamwork among them, thereby fostering camaraderie and harmonious relationships. The findings highlighted the crucial role of family support especially the parents on the learners' journey in the new normal mode of learning, emphasizing that students become stronger, more resilient, and more motivated to learn when they are fully supported by their parents. In addition, the attitudes of the students towards the online learning greatly matter in coping with the challenges they are facing. Having an optimistic view on the situation even how demanding it is and accepting such condition sincerely even how tough it is turned out to be the weapon of some of the participants in combatting the hectic challenges encountered.

Several significant responses from the participants are shown below:

“When we're having a bad connection in our place, I look for a place where there's a good internet connection even if I had to go to the city that is a farther place. Sometimes it was really hard because I get too far away, yet I sacrifice for I had no choice. This is the new normal and I have to accept it; otherwise, I'll be left behind.”

“I cope with those challenges by going with the flow and accepting the situation to avoid stressing myself. Every time I needed to attend a class, I always go to the vulcanizing shop to seek for a signal because there's no other place where I can find a stable signal. And I put the full volume of my phone every time the environment will get noisy and lower the volume if the environment gets quiet.”

“I believed that every problem has a solution, all we have to do is to find that solution to solve our problems. I am grateful because every time I had problems, my parents are there to guide and support me. This new normal really tried our ability to take innumerable challenges, but I believed that MSUans are survivors not quieter. I don't easily give up during hardship although yes, sometimes, I feel down and cried a lot but still fighting because I was not the only one who felt this way and I also believed that all of my emotions are valid because I am just a human being. I learn to accept the new normal, do my best in online classes, and let the Almighty Allah S.w.t do the rest.”

“I cope up with those challenges through having a positive mindset and being patient all the time. As much as possible, I indulge myself in online forums and learn more from those knowledgeable people. The strategies that I've been doing is look information about our certain lessons, read and understand all the time because in this time of challenges, I can only rely to myself and my own knowledge and takeaways.”

“I always remind myself that every challenge is an opportunity to grow. I voiced out my thoughts and fears to my best friend and siblings. I tried to manage my time, I



sought help from people who had more knowledge than me in terms of answering difficult activities, and I prayed to God to help me face those challenges.”

“The beginning is always the hardest! My Auntie and some seniors in our school are always giving me advice regarding the things that I need to know, and what I need to do. They always answer my questions and inquiries and everything. As time goes by, I learn and understand how it works. So, I just continue doing my best in my studies and I try to join social groups even on Facebook so that I can explore more this new journey and know myself better. Through that, I found new friends that have the same experiences as me.”

“What helped me really was nurturing my spiritual life. I offered my sufferings to my source (God). It helped me persevere because I know I have a God that will never abandon me. Thus, during difficult times when I wanted to give up on my studies and on myself, I prayed earnestly that He may give me strength. Through His guidance, I learned to have grit and just go on, no matter the circumstance. Nurturing the soul heals its vessel — the body.”

“There is nothing I can do about the Internet connection but in terms of the power interruptions, I bought a pocket wifi that I can use though it only works in our rooftop and performs poorly but at least I still have something to use, it is better than having nothing to use at all because data doesn’t work in our place, even the service itself is barely available.”

“There isn't much of a solution for my biggest problem. I can only double down on the efforts and time I've spent on my online classes. I'm trying to create a better support system for myself by allowing myself to be helped by others and by not bearing the weight of all my problems. I'm trying to create better accountability for myself by joining study spaces online like on Facebook and informing the people around me about my exams and my performance in the said exams. Moreover, I employed productivity apps (like app blocker) in my phone to help discipline myself.”

“I have a productivity plan which includes rock-solid time management system, and planning that helped me find the light out of every tunnel. I also have reading as my personal-favorite escapism as well as daily journaling after waking up and before going to bed to declutter my mind, to reflect on the outcome of my day, and equally important, to relegate how I feel. Remarkably so, I meditate for 10-15 minutes especially when I'm very frustrated and about to explode to fine-tune my breathing and let my negative emotions dissipate.”

“I cope with those challenges by praying and motivating myself though it's not easy. Joining social groups has helped me a lot. I was able to express my thoughts and feelings when sharing our experiences. We build genuine friendship and solidarity.”

“Online learning was never easy for me and my classmates; We may enjoy some of the activities given by some of our instructors, yet there are those that startle us and lower our motivation because they do not address our needs and interests. We hope the activities given by our teachers will primarily be focused on us so we can easily cope with the various challenges that we encounter in online learning.”

The last statement uncovered one essential finding of this study, which contradicts the findings of the previous researchers mentioned earlier which stated that online learning is student-centered as it gives students the opportunity to decide what material they learn and how they learn it. Instead, some participants of this study exposed that in their online learning, some of the activities are teacher-centered and this affected the participants' English language learning; hence, ESL teachers are suggested to create meaningful activities that are student-centered to address the student's individual needs.

## **Conclusion**

The present study elucidates the challenges and insights of selected University ESL learners on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the data collected from the participants using self-written reflections and semi-structured interviews, the results revealed that ESL learners encountered difficulties when attending online classes, and the primary challenges they faced included among others, poor/weak/slow/unstable/unreliable internet connection, lack of time management, financial problems, mental health issues and lack of motivation and engagement. Further, it was also shown in the findings that issues with internet connectivity appeared to be the most difficult among the challenges encountered. In light of the challenges, several valuable insights were provided by the learners in coping with those difficulties such as a change of perspectives and habits like having a positive outlook on the situation by accepting and embracing the new normal way of learning, managing their time properly, and strengthening social support throughout creating groups on Facebook and other social networking sites, which enhance collaboration and teamwork among them, thereby fostering camaraderie and harmonious relationships. Finally, English teachers, ESL learners, school administrators, and the University, in general, are suggested to reflect on the findings of this study to come up with better strategies and techniques to enhance and advance the effectiveness and efficiency of online teaching and learning activities, especially in times of crisis.

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